

The Thirty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Malachi 3:19-20A
<i>Response</i>	The Lord comes to rule the earth with justice.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 98:5-6, 7-8, 9
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Thessalonians 3:7-12
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 21:5-19

The 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year C brings our brief journey through Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians to an end by looking at some more of his moral exhortations, his ethical exhortations to the Thessalonians regarding the issue of idleness and labor in the church at Thessalonica and in the community. So let's see. It's from Second Thessalonians 3:7-12. Very famous passage and very consequential passage from the letters of Paul regarding the dignity and the duty of work, of manual labor. So let's see what Paul has to say here. 2 Thessalonians 3:7

For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, we did not eat any one's bread without paying, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you. It was not because we have not that right, but to give you in our conduct an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: If any one will not work, let him not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living.¹

What's going on here? Okay, there's a lot going on. First, you might recall from another video that at the beginning of Second Thessalonians, in chapter one and two, Paul's addressing a problem in the church of that Thessalonica regarding

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

eschatology. There are some people in the church who apparently have been led into the false opinion that the parousia, the second coming of Christ, the day of the Lord, has either already happened, apparently when Christ was raised from the dead, or that it is about to come. It's at hand, it's going to happen imminently. It'll happen next week or next month. As we saw there, it's a little ambiguous, but either way, it appears that that view has led some people, perhaps, to basically stop working.

This passage is one of the reasons some people favor that second interpretation that the day the Lord is at hand, because you can understand why if some people think Jesus is going to come next week or next month, they might just quit their jobs and stop working and just live a life of idleness where they're no longer laboring, but they're just waiting, watching the clock for Jesus to come. So Paul says here, in the context of some people living these lives of idleness, that they themselves ought to know how to imitate Paul, because when Paul was at Thessalonica, he wasn't idle, but rather he toiled and labored night and day so that he might not burden any of them.

Now, what's Paul talking about here? Well, you might recall if you go to the Book of Acts 18:1 and following, that although Paul was a scholar, he was a rabbi, according to the Book of Acts, he was a student who learned at the feet...he sat at the feet of Rabbi Gamaliel, one of the greatest teachers of the Pharisees in Jerusalem and Judea in the first century AD, extremely famous teacher. Although Paul was a scholar, he was also a laborer, he was also a worker. He had been trained, apparently, in the art of tent making. And so he was able to practice tent making and to make money for himself whenever he needed to during his ministry. So for example, in Acts 18, we actually read that when Paul went to the city of Corinth, he was there with his friends Aquila and his wife, Priscilla, who were both Jewish people who had been expelled from Rome by the Emperor Claudius. And in verse three, Luke says about Paul:

and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them [Aquila and Priscilla], and they worked, for by trade they were tentmakers. And he argued in the synagogue every sabbath, and persuaded Jews and Greeks.

So this is an interesting window into Paul's public ministry. So when Paul's in Corinth, he isn't just eating the food of people who are taking him in. He's not living off the dime of others and preaching to them. Rather, what he's doing is during the week, he's working, he's making tents, he's working with Priscilla and

Aquila as a tent maker to make money. And then on the weekend, as we would call it, on the Sabbaths, he's in the synagogue where the Jews are gathering to worship the Lord and hear the word of God, and preaching to them about the messianic identity of Jesus as son of God.

And so, evidently, we can infer from the evidence in Acts and the evidence in Second Thessalonians, that when Paul was in Thessalonica, he operated according to the same *modus operandi*, right? So he likewise, when he was in Thessalonica, didn't burden people financially, the people that he was evangelizing, but rather he worked, made his own living and wasn't idle, worked day and night, he tells us. So he even worked nights, probably making tents, so that he could provide for himself and not put a burden on them while he was preaching the gospel to them. So Paul begins this section of Second Thessalonian saying, listen, I've heard that some of you are living in idleness. Well, if you're living in idleness, you're actually living out of step with the tradition I gave you.

So again, this wasn't in the reading for today, but if you back up just one verse, Paul says:

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you...

So here Paul has another tradition. It's not a tradition about the second coming of Jesus or the antichrist or anything like that. Here the tradition is if you're a Christian, idleness is not an option for you. You need to be working, if you're able as he'll say later. If you're able to work, you should work to provide for yourself. You should make your living through some kind of labor. And Paul sets as an example, his own model, right? I didn't live in idleness. I worked when I was among you, right? I did this not because I had to. This is interesting. He says, I had the right to lean on you and to request from you aid, but I didn't exercise that right because I wanted to give you an example of labor. Now, when Paul says I had the right to ask of you aid, what's he referring to? Well, we don't know for certain, but the likelihood is he's alluding to a teaching of Jesus here. If you go back to Luke 10, for example, when Jesus sends the Apostles out on their mission in the missionary discourse of Luke 10, Jesus actually says in chapter 10, verse seven:

And remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the laborer deserves his wages

So this is one of the principles of the Apostolic Tradition, that when one of the Apostles would go out and preach the Gospel, it was fitting that in return for the preaching of the Gospel, those to whom he was preaching would give him lodging and food. So food and shelter would be his remuneration because he was laboring for them. So Jesus does not expect the Apostles to not eat or not have shelter. They're going to need those things as they engage in their mission. So he tells them to prevail upon the hospitality of those to whom they are preaching. So Paul, interestingly enough says, I had the right to do that. I could have prevailed upon you Thessalonians to feed me and clothe me and give me housing, but I didn't because I wanted to give you an example of labor and of diligence. I wanted to show you that you should work for your living and you should provide for yourselves, right? So a very interesting window into apostolic evangelization and the activity that went on in the early Church. And he says in verse 10, after pointing out his own example, apparently one of the things he preached to them about was preaching against idleness or what we would call sloth, right? This capital sin, sloth. He says:

even when we were with you, we gave you this command: If any one will not work, let him not eat.

Okay. So notice, when he says, we gave you this command, again, he's using the language of tradition. We handed a command onto you. This is a principle. It's an ethical, moral, spiritual principle that comes from Christ to the Apostles, and then the Apostles give them to the congregations that they form.

If anyone will not work, let him not eat.

So Paul says:

we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living.

It's really important to emphasize that when Paul says, "If anyone will not work, let him not eat," Paul is not saying, and this is important, because it's been used this way, he's not talking about refusing to give alms to the poor or to beggars. How do

we know he is not talking about that? Well, because Jesus is really explicit also in the Gospels that that's a mandate. So for example, if you look at Matthew 5:42, I mean it's in the Sermon on the Mount. What does Jesus say?

Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you.

So Jesus is really clear about the obligation to give alms to beggars. That's not who Paul's talking about. Paul's talking about believers who are in the Church, who are in the community of believers, who are able to work but are idle. In other words, they're not doing anything, they're just busy bodies as he puts it, right? Those people are the people who are basically, they're kind of like ecclesiastical parasites. They're living off the wealth of the Church. So these people are living off the labor of others in the Church, but making no contribution themselves. And Paul says if there's someone doing that, they're living idleness and they're able to work and they won't work, then they shouldn't eat. Now remember, one of the practices of the early Church was to feed people, was to provide, right? So for example, in Acts 6, you might recall the Apostles select those seven righteous men to give out some of the daily distribution to the widows and things like that, because providing food was an important service that the community was engaged in. And the Apostles said, look, we need to appoint someone else to do this. We need to preach the word of God. We don't have time to wait tables. Right.

And you can imagine in that kind of situation where the Church was known for charity, there might be people who would prey upon that, take advantage of that, who didn't really need it. Same thing happens, I'm sure, to this day in parishes and in other charitable organizations. So Paul's reprimanding some who are living lives of idleness and not doing any work, but are fully able being busy bodies and gadding about doing who knows what. So his exhortation, we command you. This isn't a suggestion. We command you in the Lord Jesus Christ. So he takes the name of the Lord. This is a solemn command. To do your work in quietness, no complaining, and to earn your own living.

So a fascinating window into the social character of the early Church. And it is interesting to me that as you look throughout the history of Christianity, this verse in particular is going to become a seed bed of teaching among the Church Fathers, especially in the monastic tradition, for the importance of not just praying and contemplating, but also of working. We'll get to that in just a minute when we look at the Rule of St. Benedict. For our purposes here, the main point is in the initial

context, in the original context, this command is given to the Thessalonians by Paul because apparently the eschatological errors and the eschatological fervor of some of the believers in Thessalonica have led them into a moral error, which is thinking that they can just be idle and that they don't have a duty to actually earn their own living and take care of themselves through their own labor. And that's the ending. That's how the second letter to Thessalonians ends, with those words that I think every dad likes. If anyone in this house will not work, let them not eat. Right. So even at the level of the family, all right, if the kids aren't going to pitch in and do their fair share, well, somebody might be going to bed without supper. St. Paul's not just a good theologian, he's a good spiritual father. Anyway, okay. Not that I've ever sent any of my kids to bed without supper. That's not what I'm saying. I'm just speculating somebody might do that.

Okay. Anyway, living tradition. How has this verse been interpreted in the tradition? So in order to illustrate this, I want to look at two examples of the impact that this verse has had on the living tradition of the Church, what the Germans would refer to as the *nachleben*, the afterlife of a passage in scripture. How it continues to live on and affect the growth and development of Christian doctrine in the life of the Church. So the first example of Second Thessalonians 3 and its impact is from the most famous writing, most popular, I should say, writing of St. Athanasius of Alexandria. Now, Athanasius is known primarily for his participation in the Council of Nicaea and his writings against the Arian heresy in the fourth century. But Athanasius also wrote the first blockbuster Christian book, which was his biography of St. Antony of the desert. So *The Life of St. Antony* by St. Athanasius was one of the most popular early Christian writings. And here I have a copy of early Christian lives, and the first biography in this is from St. Athanasius's *Life of St. Anthony*. If you've not read the *Life of St. Anthony of the Desert* by St. Athanasius, just put all the other books down and go read it. It was a blockbuster for a reason. It's a powerful, powerful witness to the holiness of the Desert Fathers in the early centuries of Christianity. And in any case, in St. Athanasius *Life of Anthony*, this verse comes up. Listen to what it says. It says this:

[St. Anthony of the Desert]

even though he's a hermit, right, living by himself:

labored with his hands... because he heard: "If any man will not work, neither let him eat" [2 Thess 3:10], spending a part for bread and a part on

the needy. He prayed continually, because he had learned that one must pray in secret without ceasing.²

So notice, what is St. Athanasius telling us? He's telling us that St. Anthony of the Desert, who is one of the greatest saints of all time, who was a man who was in a constant state of contemplative prayer, constant perpetual prayer, performing miracles and doing all these other extraordinary things, did not consider it beneath himself to also work to earn his daily bread, right? He could have easily said, I'm this great saint, I'm this great holy man, I'm a hermit. Somebody else needs to provide for me and do the mundane task of acquiring money to get bread so that I can feed myself. But he didn't do that. Why didn't he do that? Why did he couple his life of prayer with a life of labor? Because of 2 Thessalonians 3:10, because St. Paul the Apostle, he heard the words, meaning he heard them in the liturgy by the way, he heard them in the words of St. Paul, if any man won't work, let them not eat. Right. So that's one example. That's from the patristic tradition of the Desert Fathers.

Later on, when you move into the fifth and sixth centuries, as you have the development of the monasteries, especially in the West with the Rule of St. Benedict, who's kind of the father of Western monasticism, the same principle is going to play out in one of the other blockbusters of early and medieval Christianity, which is the Rule of St. Benedict. And this might look like a big book, but the print's really big. This is a beautiful addition of the Rule of St. Benedict published by Liturgical Press. It's really wonderful. It's very, very short. You can read it in no time. And if you haven't read the Rule of St. Benedict, put all your other books down and go read the Rule of St. Benedict. So as you're reading through the Rule of St. Benedict, you may notice that even though he's not as explicit as St. Athanasius in linking this principle, he's also very clear as you read through the rule that the principles of *ora et labora*, prayer and labor, are one of the basic fundamental principles of Benedictine monastic life. And that labor is something he requires of his monks, so that they not only pray, *ora* they also labor, *labora*. And that's going to play out not just in the West, but also in the East. And I'll end with this one quote. This is from St. Basil the Great, in one of his letters he says this about St. Paul's teaching and he makes clear that Paul's words about idleness refer to those who are able to work, but who choose not to. This is what he says:

² Athanasius, *Life of St. Anthony*; trans. Mary Emily Keenan.

He who is idle, although able to work, should not eat; moreover, he who is occupied with some task which is rightly intended for the glory of Christ ought to hold himself to a pursuit of work within his ability.³

So what Basil points out there, and this will be one of those examples of how the fathers make sure we're interpreting the text correctly, is that he's making clear that when Paul says, "If anyone shall not work, he should not eat", he's not referring to people who aren't able to labor, like the sick or the elderly, right? Or widows who have advanced in years, but rather to anyone who is able to work but chooses not to, right? And he's instructed them to recognize that part of being a good Christian, part of being a good disciple of Jesus Christ, is holding oneself to a pursuit of work within our ability.

³ Basil the Great, *Letters*; trans. Agnes Clare Way.